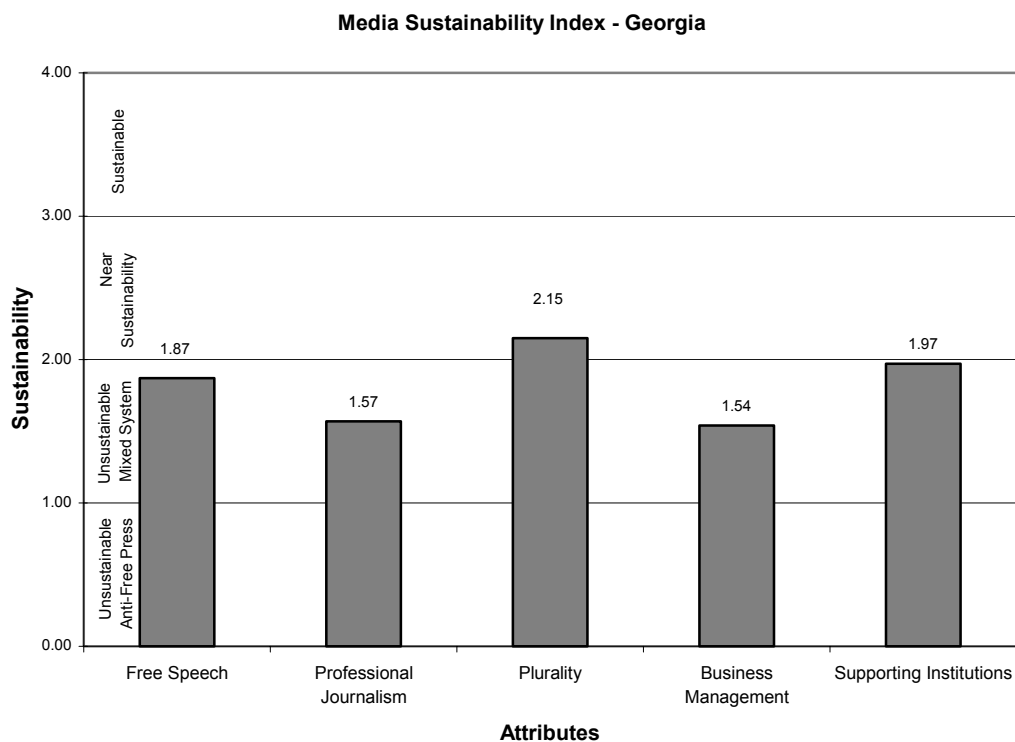


## Georgia

### Introduction

Freedom of media is one of the most progressive aspects of Georgia's democratic transition. Compared to other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, Georgian media are relatively diverse and even professional. The biggest difficulties media face are rooted in the country's poor economy and rampant corruption. As one of the poorest nations in the former Soviet Union, Georgia grapples with basic necessities for its citizens: the luxury of developing media is not always the highest-ranking priority. Even the cost of newsprint is prohibitive and only adds to the difficulties print outlets experience in selling profitable papers, as many people cannot afford to buy dailies and instead watch TV. The heavy hand of corruption has not spared Georgia either and its influences are felt throughout all aspects of Georgian life.

Despite these problems, Georgia has attempted to develop a free and democratic press. Since adapting its post-communist constitution in 1995, the country has allowed for the protection and growth of independent media. However, there have been some notable and worrisome challenges to free media, whether through licensing restrictions, vague regulatory codes, or "creative taxation." Recent attempts by the government to restrain media freedom include a conflict between the *Rezonansi* newspaper and a minister of internal affairs: the newspaper published documentation about the illegal purchase of the Georgian soccer team DINAMO by the minister. President Shevardnadze literally condemned media for "publishing material ... that they don't have proof for."



**Scoring System**

- 0** = Country does not meet indicator; government or social forces may be actively opposed to its implementation.
- 1** = Country minimally meets aspects of the indicator; forces may not be actively opposed to its implementation but business environment may not support it and government or profession not fully and actively supporting change.
- 2** = Country has begun to meet many aspects of indicator but progress may be too recent to judge or still dependent on current government or political forces.
- 3** = Country meets most aspects of indicator and implementation of indicator has occurred over several years and/or change in government, indicating likely sustainability.
- 4** = Country meets the aspects of the indicator; has remained intact over multiple changes in government, economic fluctuations, changes in public opinion and/or changing social conventions.

The scores for all indicators are totaled and averaged for each objective.

**Each of the objectives can receive a score from 0 to 4:**

- Above 3: Sustainable and free independent media
- 2-3: Independent media approaching sustainability
- 1-2: Significant progress remains to be made; society or government not fully supportive
- 0-1: Country meets few of indicators and government/society actively opposing changes

As an extremely important aside, since the time the Georgia MSI was conducted, George Sanaia, the leading journalist of the independent television station RUSTAVI-2 was murdered. Sanaia was found by police in his home on July 26, 2001, with a shot to the back of his head. For the last three years George Sanaia was the anchor of a late night news program “Night Courier.” Initial investigations connect his murder with his journalistic activity. Journalists and the citizens of Georgia protested against the brutal murder of George Sanaia by demonstrating in the streets. All the polls and surveys suggest that people believe he was killed because of his political reporting and that the investigation will not be fairly conducted, and the murderer will never be found.

The government and media have conducted their own separate investigations: however, nothing is known yet and the investigation is ongoing. One suspect has been arrested, but there is no proof linking him to the crime. Sanaia’s murder has infuriated many Georgian citizens; even those who despise independent TV station RUSTAVI-2. His murder has been called “a terrible disrespect towards the whole nation.”

**Attribute #1: Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information**

| Indicators   |
|--|
| 1. Legal/social protections of free speech exist and are enforced  |
| 2. Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical   |
| 3. Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries  |
| 4. Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare                |
| 5. State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence                  |
| 6. Libel is a civil law issue, public officials are held to higher standards, offended party must prove falsity and malice       |
| 7. Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists     |
| 8. Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists                 |
| 9. Entry into journalism profession is free and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists |

The 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Georgia provides for a free press. Under Article 24, “every individual has the right to receive freely and disseminate information, and express his opinion orally, in written or any other form.” Censorship is prohibited by the Georgian Law on the Press and Other Means of Mass Media (Article1), as is the establishment of media monopolies: no individual or private company

can own more than 25 percent in shares of a number of similar media companies. The 1991 Law on Media guarantees press freedom and regulates media activities. It was amended in 1997 by the Georgian parliament in an attempt to bring it in conformity with the 1995 constitution. However, the law was not accepted by media organizations, because, in their opinion, it limited press freedom. The 1991 version of the Law on Media is currently the only law enforced.

In line with its obligations as a member of the Council of Europe and in an attempt to harmonize its legislation with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (guaranteeing the right to freedom of expression and opinion), the Georgian parliament is currently considering a draft Law on Freedom of Speech. The draft was prepared by the Liberty Institute, a Georgian NGO. The draft passed its first parliamentary reading and is scheduled for a second reading. In addition to providing protection of the right to freedom of speech (Article 2) and freedom of information (Article 3), the draft includes four provisions on defamation that are particularly positive: in both Article 9 (Defamation of an Individual) and Article 10 (Defamation of a Public Figure), the burden of proof lies with the plaintiff.

Despite the codified constitutional guarantees, there are many obstacles to enforcing the existing laws. Notably, journalists are not always aware of their rights. As one of the panel members said: “Laws cannot be enforced without journalists’ active cooperation, and on the other hand, how can they cooperate without being informed of the laws?” Further complicating matters about media reform is that other laws often contradict freedom of information provisions. One of the panel members cited an instance when he tried to obtain information from a bank and received a negative response, because, as the bank officials declared, a law about bank activities in Georgia guaranteed the confidentiality of information related to banking operations. The Law on Media does not clearly define what a state secret is, which allows the government to arbitrarily deal with each information request, and leaving uncertainty about how to interpret laws.

Soviet-era historical legacies and the geographic realities of Georgia affect the media in several, often conflicting ways. The language of media in Georgia is Georgian, and in the Abkhazia region, Georgian and Abkhazian are used (the Abkhazia territory is in western Georgia). In Georgia there are no obstacles to disseminating information in any language. Ethnic minorities have a right to access information in their native languages.

As Russian was the mandatory language for most of the citizens of the former Soviet Union, most of the non-Georgian population support Russian-language media. Some minority publications are of special interest for minority groups: the Russian language newspaper *Kavkazski Aqcent* is specifically designed to cover Caucasus regional issues, and the private TV station RUSTAVI-2 broadcasts the weekly news program “Perekriostok,” which is a joint Armenian-Azerbaijan-Georgian production and covers news from the south of the Caucasus. These programs compete in quality with similar Georgian language media programs. Georgian State Television has English news program segments once a week, which are supposed to cover all major internal events, but the MSI panelists agreed that program quality is very low and does not offer viewers a broad spectrum of news or information. Two major newspapers publish in English: the *Georgian Times* and *Georgia Today*. *Rezonansi* issues a weekly paper in English, but as the panelists have observed, its quality is low and its lack of profitability makes the publishing house reluctant to expand the edition in size or frequency.

As far as licensing issues are concerned, Article 7 of the Law on Media requires that all media outlets register and obtain an operating license from the state. Print media obtain licenses from courts and then register as limited liability companies. As the panelists mentioned, there were almost no cases of refusal to register print media. A few years ago, the Ministry of Communications started licensing private broadcasters after establishing license regulations: now the Communications Regulatory Committee is responsible for granting broadcast licenses, and the president directly appoints the chairman of the committee. The Law on Press and Other Means of Mass Media, however, still states that the Ministry of Justice should register Georgian print media outlets, and that broadcasters should obtain licenses from the

Ministry of Communications. Many independent media companies still consider license-granting procedures unfair and monopolized by state media. State media companies are much favored by the ministries and independent media face various obstacles to obtaining licenses: they have to pay bribes, their program guidelines are declared contradictory to laws, or they are warned of the limited number of frequencies. Panelists admitted that for most broadcast companies it is almost impossible to obtain licenses without bribery and/or protectionism. According to Internews in Georgia, the development of media has been hampered by unimplemented licensing regulations: no new licenses have been issued for over a year and a half. All proposals for obtaining licenses, both state and private, have been delayed.

The lack of “acceptable” content sometimes leads to licensing disputes with the Georgian government. There are a number of where government has used its power to revoke licenses and close independent media outlets whose domestic coverage is considered too negative (for example, unfavorable coverage of government activities, cases of corruption, criminal actions). The most popular private TV station, RUSTAVI-2, achieved a notable legal victory in the battle for its license, which was illegally revoked by the Ministry of Communications in 1996. The reason, as the Ministry explained, was that RUSTAVI-2 was registered as a limited liability company without clearly specifying that broadcasting will be one of its activities. The frequency was awarded to a different broadcasting company. The battle ended up at the Supreme Court in 1997. RUSTAVI-2 regained its license and restored its independence. This case had a great public resonance: many people and even some state officials supported RUSTAVI-2.

Instances where media law may stand in the way of free expression and media are not uncommon. One element of media law that could be used against independent reporting is Article 10 of the Law on Press and other means of Mass Media, under which the state may deny registration to a media outlet whose goals are considered in contradiction of Georgian law. Article 10 is very broad and open to legal maneuvering: it states that “Registration of a media outlet may be refused in case its programs and goals are considered to contradict the law.” According to the law, the government may suspend an outlet’s activity—both print and broadcasting—for a year without legal proceedings if the disseminated information is, for example, considered to be directed at changing or replacing the existing government. The same bodies that register media outlets screen the content of reporting: courts for print media, and the Communications Regulatory Committee for broadcasters.

Media companies are registered and taxed like private businesses. Though printing is not taxed, most panelists admitted that taxes are so high that some print media owners hide real circulation numbers to pay less in taxes. One panelist mentioned that although he considers his newspaper a business activity, he realizes that it can never be profitable enough to guarantee a secure income for him and his family. He admitted, “No serious newspaper with a large circulation could survive without withholding tax payments.” The panelist also said he would think twice before expanding his (small) newspaper’s size and, consequently its price, because that would result in fewer sales and more taxes. Taxes may sometimes serve as a tool to silence troublesome media: tax inspectors discover minor tax violations, which is used to suspend the paper’s license temporarily. This is what happened to the daily *Rezonansi* during the 1995 election campaign. As one panel member said, “If tax inspectors are seen in the paper’s offices, that means that an investigative report on a state official or the ruling party is prepared.”

Crimes against media workers are committed in the form of physical harassment and threats. On July 24, 2000 a reporter from *Eko Digest* was beaten by two police officers after he published an article on allegedly corrupt high-ranking law enforcement officials, including the Interior Affairs Minister. The attackers slashed the fingers of the reporter’s right hand, so that he would not be able to write for some time. After an official investigation was launched, the reporter received an anonymous death threat. In May 2000 an investigative journalist, Akaki Gogichaishvili, claimed to have been repeatedly threatened by local officials and businessmen for exposing the rampant corruption that plagues Georgian government and economy. His well-investigated report included facts and arguments that shocked the public with its convincing tone. His investigative news program (“60 Minutes”) launched a critical investigation into the

deals of the friends and family of the president. According to the journalist, the Deputy General Prosecutor personally threatened him. Six hundred people held a demonstration to support the reporter and demanding that the president guarantee his safety. The president ordered the Interior and Security Ministries to take all the necessary measures to protect the journalist and his family.

The public has expressed support for individual reporters who have been harassed or threatened, but there are also cases in which people do not show much interest. Both politics and journalism in Georgia are highly personal: often it is not the legal violation that causes a public outcry, but the fact that a crime was committed against a person they know.

Defamation is a criminal offense under the Georgian Criminal Code. The 1991 press law forbids revealing state secrets; calling for an overthrow or a change of government or threatening public order; advocating war; promoting brutality and racial, ethnic, or religious intolerance; disseminating information that fosters crime; invading citizens' privacy; and insulting someone's honor or dignity. In 1998, 1999, and 2000, there were several cases of journalists being sued by government officials on these charges; no imprisonment decisions have been made so far.

Most media professionals have very low salaries (about US\$20-100 per month in Tbilisi, and much less in the regions), and the management of media as a business is very poor. However, media employees still make twice as much as average public worker, whose salary is about US\$10-50 per month, or a bit higher in private businesses and NGOs. Subscriptions and sales cannot guarantee financial sustainability. Distribution firms are now in private hands, but out in the regions most people cannot afford print media on a regular basis. Distributors usually favor state print media, which circulate in a larger number of regions.

The advertising market is small and there are no professional managers, administrators, or market directors working in the media sector. Media is seldom seen as a business. It is more of a tool to influence public opinion, which is why political parties own most independent media. Oftentimes, favorable reports are ordered and journalists are paid directly by interested parties and individuals. Political parties and officials openly control media organizations through their ownership of media companies and by appointing editorial staff and journalists according to their political interests.

Although some independent TV stations try to cover the whole country, mostly by retransmitting their programs through regional TV stations, the State Television and Radio Company is the only nationwide broadcasting company. Other independent media organizations in the regions find it very hard to enter this state-monopolized market.

As one panel member noted: "there's a big gap between Tbilisi and the regional TV/radio stations. Those in the regions have poor technical equipment and professional levels, and almost all of them are owned and censored by some local politician." In Tbilisi the situation is better, but even there most independent stations are financially unstable; even if they manage to get a license and start operating, they can soon find themselves bankrupt and forced to reduce their broadcast time and quality or close down altogether.

Usually, journalistic investigations dealing with the illegal deeds of public officials are met with indifference by the government. Investigative journalists are usually harassed or threatened by those they investigate or write about. Sometimes, NGOs lobby for official investigations on some important cases. In May 2000, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) appealed to President Shevardnadze to launch an investigation into the attempts to intimidate RUSTAVI-2 journalist Akaki Gogichaishvili. Although the president's press secretary, Kakha Imnadze, responded to the appeal, Imnadze was subsequently unavailable to meet a CPJ representative.

Panel members complained that most of information supposed to be accessible to journalists is not. Generally, inexperienced journalists, who do not know their rights, give up and write their stories without

obtaining the needed information. Panelists agreed, “Every single day they [journalists] have to fight for ‘so-called’ public information—make phone calls, write many official letters requesting the needed material.” Information access is always denied journalists when, for example, they investigate a botched police investigation. In general, investigative journalists have a hard time obtaining information from law enforcement bodies like the police, the prosecutor’s office, or the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There are many cases of journalists being forced to leave their offices, whereupon their equipment is damaged or confiscated. Such cases are usually reported, but the police cannot guarantee a fair investigation. As many journalists say, such incidents are usually dealt with privately without the involvement of legal bodies.

Access to international news is not hampered by the state. Georgian outlets are allowed to reprint or rebroadcast foreign media programming. There are no restrictions on the part of the state on Internet use. The only challenge is financial: most newspapers, TV, and radio companies cannot afford subscriptions to pricey foreign information sources, unlimited access to the Internet, or cable networks for their employees.

Entry into the journalism profession is not restricted or limited by the state. However, all names of journalism faculty graduates in Tbilisi are on record with the Ministry of State Security; every year, the Ministry updates its databases. Several times the government has attempted to impose blanket restrictions on journalist activities. For example, in 2000, President Shevardnadze officially declared that Georgian media were too frivolous and “no government in the world had to deal with such media, except Georgian.” This was understood as the beginning of media repressions in the country, but so far no serious legal restrictions or limitations have survived the active protest of the independent media, the NGO sector, and the public itself.

**Attribute #2: Journalism meets professional standards of quality**

| Indicators   |
|--|
| 1. Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced  |
| 2. Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards  |
| 3. Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship   |
| 4. Journalists cover key events and issues   |
| 5. Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption     |
| 6. Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming                                 |
| 7. Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient |
| 8. Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political)        |

Political pressure and censorship are two of the most serious barriers to the development of free and independent media in Georgia. These barriers exist at many levels: from station managers that self-censor programs to keep national and local authorities happy, to news editors that reshape the order and content of news programs to fit the outlet’s policy, usually defined by the government in power.

There are about 600 independent newspapers in the country. Most of them show great eagerness for pursuing “shocking true stories” about state officials. Unfortunately, the information their audiences receive is rather inaccurate, incomplete, or exaggerated. However, there are some technically well-equipped publications and broadcast companies that copy the style, design, and programming of Western media—which does not guarantee serious, independent, fact-based reporting. There are also quite a few print outlets and broadcasters with small budgets and bad print or broadcast quality, which precludes them, perhaps unfairly, from having a presence in media.

The years of controlled media and non-democratic development in the former Soviet republics have resulted in today’s difficulties in developing true professionalism in the Georgian media. The public chronically distrusts the information disseminated by media: as panelists put it, “The news in the paper, TV or radio are taken from the news agencies and not even edited by editors. Specialized and in-depth

reporting is very rare in Georgian media.” The stories reported often prove to be false, or if true, they rarely lead to any social action. The need to produce sensational material, which makes people buy media products or watch a particular channel, exacerbates the lack of good professional reporting.

During the discussion some panelists stated that: “In Georgian media, opinion writing overwhelms fact-based writing. There is too much about private conflicts in the press and not enough fact information.” Another panelist explained that the lack of professional media is caused by the difficulties of obtaining useful information. Facts are not easily gathered, because the state is not willing to collaborate. Most journalists complain about barriers created to obstruct investigative research on the dealings of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the police, who often hide information on harassment in prisons, such as beatings, fake suicides, etc. Tensions between police and journalists often lead to fights, threats, and harassment on the part of police. A panel member warned: “In Georgian media some journalists work simultaneously for both state and independent media.”

Inexperienced journalists, without the perception, maturity, or ability to understand complex issues, were targeted as a major reason for the poor quality of journalistic output. Panelists said, “The language in the press is of very low quality. Journalists are often uneducated and sometimes not very intelligent. The language abounds in slang, foreign words, unusual sentence structures.” Another panelist mentioned: “I think we have to remember the age of people working as journalists—most of them are under 30, some even under 20. Yes, they are free from the Communist propaganda style, but how can a 20-year-old kid report about crucial political events of a complex character?”

The issues of ethics and professional standards are frequently talked about in Georgian society. Most people regard Georgian media as unethical and do not trust them to professionally gather, check, and disseminate facts. Some panelists proposed creating special ethical and professional norms for journalists; others believed that by improving the financial situation (higher salaries, better equipment, etc.) professional standards would also rise. “There is an attempt to establish ethical norms to guarantee the trustworthiness of information,” said one panelist. “For example, *Dilis Gazeti* set up its own norms and required its reporters to follow them. I think that each media has some kind of written or unwritten rules they adhere to.”

While the Law on Mass Media officially prohibits censorship, political pressure is strong and editors and journalists censor their materials, reported panelists: “Self-censorship is one of the biggest problems, especially in the regions. In small communities it is considered unethical to write critically about your neighbor’s relative, even (and more so) if he is a public official.” Because advertising and circulation revenues are low, newspapers and broadcast companies have to rely on other financial sources, which are mostly political parties or members of the government. Journalists frequently exercise self-censorship on critical reporting of certain topics, including in particular politically sensitive matters and issues that are perceived to enjoy widespread popular support. For example, it is relatively difficult to publish articles critical of the Georgian role in ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia or South Ossetia. The level of editorial independence of the media is considerably lower outside Tbilisi than in the capital. In particular, the more repressive local regimes of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ajaria impose greater restrictions on media freedoms.

Unskilled journalists often become victims of political intrigues and/or mouthpieces of powerful groups and individuals. Said one panelist: “I think that reporters are mostly victims of conflicts between political powers, and they disseminate information which is dictated to them by the powerful of the day. Journalists are owned by politicians: opinions in the press are those of politicians, not of journalists.” Panelists said that journalists rely too much on the information provided by sources, and when they sign their names on their reports, there is no mention of the source.

As the higher education institutions cannot guarantee quality professional training, young journalists are not ready to deal with fact gathering, fact checking, or other research. As a panelist noted, “There’s a big

gap between professional journalism and training at Tbilisi State University. I mean that journalists just aren't taught to search for facts and spend more time and energy on researching and analyzing." During the discussion, panelists often claimed that the financial instability of the profession is an obstacle for independent and professional reporting. "Journalists are underpaid, most of them work in several places simultaneously, are often on tight deadlines, and have no time and desire for extensive research. Intentionally or unintentionally, they fall into the 'subjectivity trap'; that is, facts and opinions are never separated. Even news contains a sentence or two of commentary, often reflecting a political or commercial agenda."

Average salaries for newspaper journalists are 50-100 lari per month (US\$25-50), and for broadcast journalists about US\$50 -150. "One of the worst consequences of low salaries," said a panelist, "is the priority of quantity over quality. More words mean more money, no matter how unprofessional and unchecked the information is." Only a few companies manage to guarantee an income that discourages corruption. Quite a few journalists are willing to accept money in exchange for favorable articles about commercial enterprises or politicians.

The degree of entertainment coverage by print and broadcast media varies. As news reporting for TV and radio is more expensive than for print media, entertainment accounts for a greater share of broadcast time. Usually, independent TV stations broadcast news programs five to seven times per day, and music and movies fill in the rest of the time. In print media most space is dedicated to news, although entertainment topics (mostly translated from foreign magazines) are widely available.

Almost none of the media companies use professional public opinion research on a regular basis. Thus the decision on which events should receive most attention is determined by the interests of individual journalists, and do not necessarily reflect the interests of audiences.

Most newspapers and broadcast companies face technical limitations. This lack of facilities greatly affects the quality of their work. Very few companies can afford Internet access or good printing and broadcasting equipment; they cannot subscribe to local or international news agencies. These limitations lead to the lack of specialized programs, investigative reporting, and in-depth analysis on specific issues. The few specialized programs are either funded by the government or by international organizations. Sometimes, when media needs additional financial support, they accept some subtle forms of bribery, perhaps in the form of advertising contracts or political advertising.

Panelists mentioned several ways to improve the quality of professional media: 1) providing access to better professional education, both in terms of higher education institutions and short-term, on-site training for regional journalists; 2) providing up-to-date equipment for newspapers, printing houses, and TV/radio stations, as well as instruction on using equipment; and 3) raising the professional criteria for hiring journalists in key positions.

**Attribute #3: Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news**

| Indicators   |
|--|
| 1. Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g. print, broadcast, Internet) exist and are affordable                                   |
| 2. Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted   |
| 3. State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are non-partisan, and serve the public interest                 |
| 4. Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media  |
| 5. Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs   |
| 6. Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates |
| 7. A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources          |

According to Internews Tbilisi, 37 independent TV stations operate outside of the capital, although many of them broadcast irregularly. There are 17 independent radio stations in the country, approximately half



of them located in the capital. Radio Fortuna and its Russian twin Radio Era broadcast throughout almost the entire country. State media are seen as the voice of government, but do cover other points of view to some extent. Panelists tried to define the meaning of “public” media, and explain differences between public and state-owned media. They viewed state media as very subjective divorced from public interests. As one panelist said: “State media do not cover all the political spectrum—it is very selective and subjective. There is no public media in Georgia, I mean, objective media for public.”

In the last year, competition between state media, RUSTAVI-2, and other independent channels pushed state television in the direction of greater openness and diversity. While general allegations that newspapers are secretly linked to powerful individuals or political parties abound, there is no credible evidence that major newspapers have such ties. A number of newspapers emerged under the patronage of powerful groups, but these publications have not been successful in the long term. Many independent media outlets express an indiscriminately cynical attitude toward all political groups.

During the discussion all panelists mentioned that there is a great difference in the quality and quantity of news between Tbilisi and the regions. Regional press and broadcast media have more problems both technically and professionally. Most of the training and professional development courses are unavailable to journalists from the regions; their equipment is outdated; and censorship exercised by local government is strong. Panelists said, “region by region the situation is different. Internet is inaccessible in most parts of the country. Computers are very rare in media companies in the regions. Newspapers don’t have their own equipment.” Panelists also mentioned that Radio Liberty’s broadcasting to the regions is one positive development to deal with information isolation: “Radio stations from the region try to communicate with Radio Liberty. Radio Liberty now covers almost all the regions, even Abkhazia.”

Average prices for newspapers range from 10 to 50 tetri (5-25 cents US\$), which is expensive for the urban population, and an almost unaffordable luxury for rural areas. The collapse of the old distribution system creates obstacles for print media, while the lack of retransmission and relay lines is a problem for independent broadcasters. State television controls both television channels with national coverage, as well as the only nation-wide radio network. RUSTAVI-2, which began operation in the small town of Rustavi, has become Georgia’s major independent TV station. After it started broadcasting in Tbilisi in 1996, RUSTAVI-2 is now expanding to other parts of the country. The station’s success has cleared the way for other privately owned TV channels, eight of which broadcast in Tbilisi.

In 1995 the newspapers *Alia*, *Rezonansi*, *Akhali Taoba*, and *7 Dge* founded the Association of Free Press, which established a network of newsstands to bypass the distribution bottleneck. According to recent polls by the Georgian research company GORBI, only 1 percent of the Georgian population has access to the Internet and the majority of these people live in Tbilisi. Obtaining information from the Internet is very expensive: Internet connection costs 35-80 cents \$US per hour. According to GORBI surveys, 92 percent of those interviewed indicated they had never used a computer. The four major reasons for not using computers were: non-availability of computers (35 percent), lack of interest (17 percent), no knowledge about using the Internet (14 percent), and too expensive (13 percent).

International television, radio, and newspapers are readily available and the government does not restrict access to them, but most of people cannot afford to buy or subscribe to them. Accessibility varies by region. Foreign newspapers are not available for sale, but some cable networks offer several foreign television channels. Cable television subscription prices range from 7 to 24 lari (US\$3.50-12) and it is considered a luxury for most of the population, both rural and urban.

Most of the news in both print and broadcast media derive from news agency information. Most of the newspapers subscribe to one or more news agencies, although it is considered to be relatively expensive (about US\$100 per month). Most television and radio stations produce primarily news and talk shows; almost all other programming consists of films and soap operas, frequently pirated (on television), and music (on the radio). The two largest TV channels in Tbilisi—Channel 1 (state television) and

RUSTAVI-2— broadcast news five times a day. They both have nighttime talk shows, which discuss major topics of the day.

Media ownership is not transparent. There are common assumptions about ownership, but they are difficult to confirm. It is more likely that ownership interests lie with major political factions, but these also are often the major business entities as well. Media ownership remains one of the most problematic issues of private media companies. Many people avoid associating their names with a specific newspaper or a broadcasting company because of the fear that the public would judge that outlet as biased in their favor. The situation with regional media is different, noted panelists: “In the regions no one hides that they own a TV or radio channel. The community is so small that everyone knows everything, and besides, it’s prestigious to own a media company. In Tbilisi, it’s different: individuals prefer their names not to be associated with a specific media company, and vice versa—media try to sustain their ‘objectivity’ by hiding their real owner.”

There are some minority news media, but not much effort is made to inform the nation on the conditions of minorities. Journalists reporting on religious minorities have been harassed, beaten, and locked out of their offices. The majority shows little interest in protecting minorities or seeking justice against their attackers. Most of the minorities living in Georgia speak Russian and have access to Russian-language press, TV, and radio. A panelist noted: “I know that there is an Abkhazian language radio, some Azeri and Armenian newspapers, but most of the minorities use Russian language media.” Other panelists mentioned that the lack of profits from minority media is an obstacle to their development: “In financial terms, it’s not profitable to broadcast in minority languages: less audience, less advertisement, less money.”

**Attribute #4: Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence**

| Indicators  |
|---|
| 1. Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses  |
| 2. Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources  |
| 3. Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market  |
| 4. Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets                                  |
| 5. Independent media do not receive government subsidies  |
| 6. Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences |
| 7. Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced  |

All the panelists agreed that media are rarely profitable businesses in Georgia. Private printing houses, newspapers, and distribution firms are having a hard time coping with the ups and downs of the unstable economical situation in the country—“Newspapers and publishing houses are not profitable—production prices are much higher than desirable. People have a very hard time finding consumers for their products and services at current prices.” Another problem for media is a dated anti-business mentality: “Many representatives of print media regard profit-making as a negative side of media. Some of them are proud ‘to serve the public free of charge,’ meaning without salaries or any other kind of profit/revenue.”

Georgia’s poor economic development has a negative impact on the media market. Press revenues come from advertising and sales, but most newspapers cannot even cover staff salaries. Advertising has no tradition in Georgia and is seen as a luxury, rather than a way to generate profits. However, the advertising business is getting popular in the capital, and there are some successful examples of advertising companies. RUSTAVI-2 is actively using ads. Panelists gave the following numbers: “Approximately two-thirds of the advertising market in Tbilisi is monopolized by RUSTAVI-2, with the remaining one-third by the State Channel 1, which leaves very little space for regional TV and print

media. In most successful newspapers, the profit ratio is 70 percent from cover sales vs. 30 percent from advertising.” Newspaper ads are relatively cheap even in the largest circulation papers, and therefore cannot cover all the costs for printing, distribution, etc.

A large number of newspapers are owned by small enterprises and the outlets advertise their products for free. Both print and broadcast media in Georgia lack professionals skilled in attracting advertising. Revenues from advertising are mostly collected in the capital, said panelists: “All the advertising revenue stays in Tbilisi. Ad agencies collaborate mostly with Tbilisi media. In the regions this business is still very fragile.” In only three or four major cities are there a number of stations competing for ads. In most cities there is only one station, to which all local advertising revenues that are available for TV go. Even given the “favorable” conditions in one-station cities, commercial managers are not accessing revenues as effectively as they could. When asked questions about advertising percentages and target audience, stations are unable to give answers, indicating that they have a largely undeveloped and unsophisticated understanding of the business of TV.

Independent media do not receive government subsidies. Several state-owned newspapers—*Sakartvelos Respublika*, and *Literaturuli Sakartvelo*—and the national TV and radio corporations receive funding from the state budget. Government appoints their management. In some cases, said a panelist, “there are the indirect subsidies from the government—information barter, informal subsidies, accreditations, etc.” Sometimes, “government organizations help particular media companies to receive grants for promoting some projects—economic or judicial reforms for example. I know that *Eko Digest* received financial support from the government for promoting some economic projects.”

Healthy competition between media companies exists in very rare cases: mostly there is no objective information about ratings of particular media outlets. Market research is also costly and is seen as an unnecessary expense, rather than a source of important information. “Market research is very expensive and not very professional,” noted panelists, “which contributes to the lack of trust towards such companies.” Panelists also mentioned “It is often the case that public opinion organizations invent or change information to please the client. Many media companies tend to use this information for self-promotion rather than for defining further strategies.”

#### **Attribute #5: Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media**

| Indicators  |
|---|
| 1. Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services                 |
| 2. Professional associations work to protect journalists’ rights  |
| 3. NGOs support free speech and independent media   |
| 4. Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience                            |
| 5. Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills |
| 6. Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and not restricted              |
| 7. Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted      |

All panelists agreed that journalists’ organizations in Georgia are too few and inefficient. This topic was not debated much, as there was a consensus among panelists. There are several new journalistic associations (Free Journalists Club, Liberty Institute, Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, Studio Re, Internews Georgia, and others), but unfortunately, they cannot establish a bonding network between journalists. One of the organizations, Free Journalists Club, is more or less actively trying to create one. There is also the Journalist Federation, but its goals and objectives are so outdated that no one can collaborate with it.

Panelists noted that there are some NGOs working with media issues, but their primary goals are still theoretical research and not practical help and assistance to specific journalists and media companies. “There are several new organizations. Some are free press NGOs that want to transform into membership-based professional associations, but most of the NGOs that work in the media field are more involved in legislative lobbying than in everyday media activities. No association can be created by a single NGO

without the help and the wish to cooperate with media representatives.” Involvement in issues concerning media, such as research on media topics, report writing, and media-law drafting, are very popular with non-governmental organizations; this guarantees positive feedback both from media and donors. Panelists said: “Most of the NGOs in the media field try to defend journalists’ rights because that may make NGOs very popular. No one is really interested in creating a strong institute, which would defend journalists’ rights and assist them in their activities.”

There are third-sector-supporting institutions that offer short-term training for journalists, but most of the panelists claimed that these offerings are insufficient. “Some NGOs offer training courses (Internews), civic education, and administration courses, and though the quality may be good, they are not enough.”

The most important role of NGOs is bringing attacks against journalists to the public and government’s attention. “In partnership with media outlets,” said panelists, “NGOs efficiently and quickly bring cases to public attention. Still, there is a little camaraderie among journalists to join forces and align around victims of attacks. Very rarely are such cases settled in court, as only a handful of media outlets can afford legal fees and other costs of filing lawsuits. Little is done in the regions, as there are very few NGOs there, and those have with outdated equipment and few funds.”

The Tbilisi State University Journalism Faculty, which is supposed to be the best journalism school in the country, cannot guarantee a good education to its graduates, according to the panel. “Traditions sometimes contradict today’s reality—our journalism was always more abstract, opinionated, commentary-based and NOT fact-based.” The academic programs lack practical training capacity and students cannot experience media work environments until they actually find a position. At the end of the discussion, panelists expressed their hope that young professionals will be raised in new social and political environments and not be bound to old, Soviet-style journalistic practices, so they can contribute to a positive change in Georgian media. Said one panelist: “I can see some changes: several years ago we had almost no interns, now many young journalists come to the radio and ask for internships. I see it as a positive change, which gives us hope for a better future.”

During Soviet times, Soyuzpechat, a state-owned distribution company, distributed print media in Georgia. In 1992 it split into two companies Georgia, Matsne and Sakpressa, both still owned by the state. In 1993 independent newspapers started hiring private individual distributors (*Krikuns*) because state firms refused to distribute their products and often delayed payments to independent outlets. Now there are several private distribution firms created by alliances among several independent newspapers. The distribution system outside of the capital is very poor; most private companies operate only within the Tbilisi region. Sakpressa charges 10 percent more of the cover price for distributing outside Tbilisi, which raises the price for papers sold in the villages, where people are least able to afford the difference “Distribution in the regions remains a major problem,” said panelists, “as is dysfunctional distribution in the cities. The majority of printing houses are furnished with outdated equipment, resulting in slow printing, delays, poor quality, and tabloid-only format. There are several high quality print houses, but their prices are too high for most media outlets.”

In Tbilisi there are about ten private printing houses, which offer relatively good printing quality. Several big newspapers have their own printing press (*Resonansi*). The regional press, however, are not satisfied with their printing options. Most of the regional printing houses are outdated and have very old equipment and low printing quality. Many regional newspapers, despite the inconveniences, get their papers printed in Tbilisi.

**List of panel participants**

1. John Hickey, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs
2. Akaki Gogichaishvili, RUSTAVI-2
3. Amy Spurling, *Georgia Today*
4. Tamar Chiqovani, Radio Liberty
5. Marina Vekua, Tbilisi State University
6. Zura Khrikadze, Internews
7. Maia Mikashavidze, GIPA Journalism School

**Observers**

Manana Gegeshidze (USAID)  
Richard Tracy and Sopo Chaava (IREX)

**Moderator**

George Topuria